

MINORITY POLICIES IN BULGARIA: PROBLEMS, SOLUTIONS

AN ANALYSIS prepared for the Contact Point on Roma and Sinti Issues / ODIHR

The problem

Widely reported frictions between some Bulgarian and Roma communities during the summer of 2007 have again illustrated that, in Bulgaria, there have been few results from the implementation of official policies aimed at Roma integration. As regards the Turkish minority, in spite of considerable progress in recent years, it is still too early to speak of a definitive overcoming of all prejudicial stereotyping and distrust.

Some history

As the Ottoman Empire pulled out after 1879, Bulgaria emerged as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, containing upward of a dozen of different ethnic-religious communities. To a considerable extent Bulgarian society lost the capacity to see itself as multi-cultural during the nationalism of the first half of the 20 th century and the socialism that followed to 1989.

This Analysis overviews the situation as regards the three biggest minorities: the Turkish, the Roma and the Bulgarian-Muslim. The emphasis is on the Roma.

Roma

Unlike Turks and Bulgarians, the Roma do not readily identify themselves, in term of ethnicity, during national censuses. Hence the official figure of 370,908 Roma in Bulgaria is far from the truth. Most independent evaluations agree on a figure of 650-800,000 (i.e. between 1/9 and 1/12 of the entire population).

Reliable estimates reveal that some 54% of the Roma live in distinct communities on the outskirts of Bulgaria's cities. In this the Roma are different from all other ethnic groups. Since 1990 the process of concentration in the "mahali" continues, as unemployment stimulates Roma migration into the bigger cities. Only in Lom an enlightened and sustained municipal policy has ensured that the Roma have not migrated to the bigger regional cities.

During the 1960 and 1970s, the Bulgarian communist government attempted to assimilate the Roma by dispersing them as family units among ethnic Bulgarians in the cities. This approach proved a failure and is not feasible in principle. As noted Bulgarian Roma analyst Yosif Nunev writes, the Roma have inhabited Europe for 10 centuries and, whereas other ethnic groups (Goths, Pechenegs, Huns etc.) did become assimilated, the Roma have not, nor are they likely to.

Integration can only be a matter of implementing a mix of individual and collective rights.

Sources of inter-group friction in modern times

Societies and communities, when entering into their period of modernisation, also enter a period of crisis of identity. Questions such as "Who are we and how do we differ from / relate to the others?" become fundamental. As noted by a major piece of research by the National Public Opinion Institute, in the early 1990s "Everyone lived with the feeling that their lives

begin again. Everyone felt as if being on a starting line, and jealously regarded the others, in case they seem more privileged”.

As a rule, in societies faced with explosive modernization the various communities retreat into a collective identity, which provides a (temporary) shelter from the crisis of identity and the feeling of helplessness in the new and unfamiliar conditions of living. Individuals become submerged into groups and the groups begin relating to each other as collectivities, suspicious on the basis of suspicion of intent.

When individuals re-emerge, and begin relating among themselves as individuals (rather than as members of groups), then the modernization of a society is clearly under way. In modern societies, people inter-relate as (complex) individuals rather than as (simple and homogenous) groups. Where modernization fails, individuals do not re-emerge, and groups enter into conflict with each other, leading to the disintegration of states and societies.

Around the late-1980s, Bulgaria entered into its crisis of modernization, producing enhanced group awareness and inter-group friction. Bulgaria escaped the Yugoslav model of disintegration along ethnic lines primarily because the peaks of “closeness” of each major group (and the consequent hostility to other groups) did not coincide.

- The problem of the *Turks* was political – the repressions and discrimination which were government policy in the 1980s. This political problem found its solution by political means with the establishment of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) in 1990. Once the Turk community found political representation via the DPS, it re-established its confidence and diminished its hostility to other groups.
- The problem for the ethnic *Bulgarians* was social – the poverty and unemployment that resulted from the collapse of the state-owned economy. Bulgarians closed ranks, blaming other groups for their misfortunes. By the early 2000s, however, the problems of poverty and unemployment were overcome. As the Turks before them, once their problem was solved, Bulgarians overcame their intolerance to others, by again relating to them as individuals, rather than as stereotyped groups. Relations between Bulgarians and Turks rapidly improved and have become exemplary.
- The modernization crisis has not been overcome in the *Roma* community. The Roma continue to be increasingly marginalised, discriminated and vulnerable. Lacking in skills, education and inclusion, the Roma remain un-included, just as the other groups begin prospering as the result of individual, rather than group efforts.

Bulgarians and Turks have become integrated into the political arena and the social mechanisms of society (education, work, health, housing, public safety). The Roma have remained outside this process. This has made them increasingly “visible” to the others as a group, and has attracted all available societal prejudice. As prejudice has disappeared between the other groups, it has heavily concentrated against the Roma. This has given birth to “counter-prejudice” in the Roma, who feel themselves the victims of recent history – the same history that has brought benefits to the majority.

On this level, the deficits of government policy have been two-fold:

a/ the government has not evolved the kinds of social and political policies that would facilitate the inclusion (“integration”) of the Roma;

b/ noted by a major study of the UNDP is the fact that, while the Roma community has produced a small number of individuals with “modernisational attitudes” towards prosperity and success in society, the government has neither noted this process, nor made the effort to support it on the level of policy; the society at large also refuses to acknowledge the existence of prospering, modern Roma, preferring to see all Roma as part of a single group with specific negative characteristics.

Current policy deficits

Bulgaria presents a paradox. At the level of legislation, strategies and programmes, the minority problematic is covered to the point of saturation. Bulgaria has ratified and harmonised with all relevant documents of the EU, UN and other relevant international organisations. Annual reports of government institutions claim that the government is aware of all problems, and all of these problems are in the process of being resolved.

Yet, at the same time, observable reality is at variance with this picture. Few sustainable policy results can be identified. Moreover, the very appearance of Roma-Bulgarian friction in the summer of 2007 is a signal of major policy failure.

In its last pre-accession evaluation Report (September 2006), the European Commission lists the following deficits as “disturbing”:

- lack of results as regards Roma inclusion into the labour market, education and health services
- lack of coherence of policy, which reduced government activities to a series of “isolated acts”
- lack of administrative capacity, particularly at the local level, on the part of the relevant government institutions
- ill-thought out and badly executed government initiatives in deporting Roma from illegal housing districts; a year later Bulgaria was singled out for criticism in this field also by the Council of Europe.
- lack of any result of declared government policy in combating racism, discrimination and xenophobia at the societal level.

Taken together with the evaluations of reputable NGOs, these critiques lead to the following interim conclusion as regards government minority policy:

The mere production of legislation and documents, unrelated and lacking links between one another, and without such documents being based on:

- *clear and long-term policy*
- *clearly articulated, internatlised (by institutions) and operationalised (in terms of activities) principles and values*

does not lead to the attainment of systemic results.

Public opinion – strengths and deficits

Self-identification

Civic self-identification by Bulgarians is the obvious strength of Bulgarian society. When asked to identify themselves along a range of options, the vast majority of ethnic Bulgarians identify themselves as “Bulgarian *citizens*”, and only 7 % choose an ethnic identity option. The same holds for the Bulgarian-Muslims. In the case of the *Turks*, ethnic self-identification is more pronounced, with some one-third of them identifying themselves along ethnicity.

The *Roma* differ sharply. Half the *Roma* identify themselves by ethnicity.

The same holds true in terms of “outside (i.e. by other groups) identification”. Some 7-8 % of Bulgarians and Bulgarian-Muslims claim that members of other ethnic groups relate to them as members of an ethnic group. With the *Turks*, one-third claim that others relate to them as “*Turks*” first and individuals second.

With the *Roma*, the situation is catastrophic: 72% of *Roma* say that other ethnic groups relate to them as “Gypsies” first. Comparing this with the 50% of *Roma*, who see themselves as *Roma* first, the picture is clear: half of the *Roma* who feel themselves as “Bulgarian citizens” see that everyone else treats them not as such, but as “*Roma*”.

The conclusion arises which backs up something that *Roma* activists have been saying for many years: that *the Roma demonstrate a particularly strong desire to be accepted by the others as equals*. The potential for inclusion / integration is available; what is needed is to find the tools to enable this potential to be realised.

Opinion trends

All reputable polls, conducted regularly since 1992, reveal the same general picture (studies by UNDP, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and National Centre for the Study of Public Opinion):

- Rising intolerance toward the *Roma*. Whereas in 1992, 43% Bulgarians would find it acceptable to have *Roma* neighbours, in 2002 this has fallen to 29%. From 1999, as Bulgarian prejudices towards the *Turks* rapidly diminished, prejudices against the *Roma* rose.
- The *Roma* are considerably less prejudiced towards Bulgarians and *Turks* than Bulgarians (and to some extent *Turks*) are towards the *Roma*.
- Much prejudice is work-related. Whereas 72% Bulgarians think that *Roma* living on social security do so because they are lazy, 80% of the *Roma* think that Bulgarians living on social security do so because they can't find work – not because they are lazy.
- All ethnic groups are convinced that person-to-person (i.e. between individuals as individuals) relations are much easier and more successful than inter-group relations. Individual relations dramatically diminish prejudice in all groups. All groups agree that the most successful inter-personal relations are conducted in the work process / work place.

- Bulgaria is *unique* insofar as the social groups that elsewhere are least prejudiced, in Bulgaria are most prejudiced: teachers, inhabitants of big cities, educators, degree holders.
- The Bulgarian public sharply differs from some average EU indicators regarding minority issues. Half of Bulgarians know a Roma person personally, compared to just 12% the EU average. More Bulgarians (66%) know personally at least one person from a different ethnic group than the EU average (55%). At the same time, Bulgarians are five times less likely (than the average European) to be aware of anti-discriminatory policies in their country.

Preliminary diagnoses:

- personal knowledge, particularly in the context of work, is a powerful factor for diminishing prejudice; lack of personal knowledge leads to group stereotyping and prejudice
- there is a systemic defect in Bulgaria's education system, insofar as: a/ professional educators are highly prejudiced and intolerant; b/ the highly educated are intolerant
- there is an obvious lack of symmetry in inter-ethnic relations: the Roma are much more tolerant to the other groups than vice versa
- in recent years, as prejudice levels overall increase, the Roma feel acutely discriminated
- Roma-targeted social policies (housing projects, mobile health units etc.) do not produce the desired results for the Roma, while producing great hostility in the majority population.

Policy recommendations:

TURKS: residual prejudice against the Turks is *political* in essence: a residual fear that they could use political power for some kind of anti-majority purpose. These fears are diminishing as the DPS (the "Turkish party") practices political power responsibly, being continuously in government since 2001. The more power the "Turks" have, the less the prejudice from the majority.

ROMA: prejudice against the Roma centres on *social* issues (social security, housing etc). Prejudice here is not centred on the public arena (politics), but on the perceived way of life of the Roma.

Roma-related *policy* should concentrate on making effective and inclusive the social policies of the government: access to work, education, health, housing. Effective social policies would resolve the basic problems relating to the exclusion of the Roma and prejudice against them.

Media

Compared to the mid-1990, the media climate is much improved, with blatant prejudice disappearing, the implementation of journalist ethic codes and the maintenance of a number of minority-related sections in the major media.

Deficits continue to exist:

- With no less than 15% of the population being some kind of minority, minority-related materials form no more than 3% of all media output.
- The vast majority of that 3% is composed of two kinds of materials: Roma crime, poverty and problems; and the activities of the DPS as representative of the Turkish community.
- Regarding the Roma, the reporting that is not to do with crime and poverty is to do with Roma music and festivals; serious Roma-related materials are very rare, and those discussing policy issues – virtually non-existent.
- The vast majority of the materials in those 3% are written by ethnic Bulgarians.
- Since 2001, specialist discriminatory media has appeared, propagating intolerance and xenophobia (two national newspapers, one national TV chain).
- When local inter-ethnic frictions with the Roma appear, media presents only the sensationalist side of events; no analyses have appeared in the media regarding the inter-ethnic incidents of 2007.

Political parties

None of the major political parties, not even the Turk-dominated DPS, has a minority-related section in its programme. None of the parties have consistent minority-related policies either in government, or in opposition. In the senior leadership, only the DPS has minority representatives (Turks), and there is a solitary Turk in the leadership of the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS).

Social and economic factors

Turks (and probably the Bulgarian Muslims) are somewhat less educated and poorer than Bulgarians, but not to an extent that can produce serious problems of exclusion and discrimination.

Regarding the Roma, they face a double exclusion:

- Unlike the Turks, they are not politically represented and included.
- Unlike the majority population and the other minorities, the Roma do not have fair access to the major resources, provided by the government and by society to its members: health, education, participation in the labour market.

Deficits of government policy

More than the average European (50% to 31%), Bulgarians expect that overcoming discrimination must be done through government policy. This burdens the Bulgarian government with unusually intense expectations. At the same time, there is no policy, but rather – piecemeal, fragmented, uncoordinated and un-evaluated activities. A good start would be for the government to make its social policies effective and inclusive, and only then add targeted interventions.

There is also a major philosophic deficit. The Bulgarian state has not been part to the debate regarding “the nation” and has not evolved the understanding that modern Bulgaria is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society. This deficit leads to blind spots and lack of sensitivity and understanding of minority issues.

Administration deficits

In order to make any policy effective, the government needs to have an effective administration. This it does not have. Administrative capacity is very weak, particularly – in the field of minorities. UNDP analyses point to some specific deficits:

- instead of implementing policies, administrations produce increasingly complex documentation and conduct imitative activities that support institutional ineffectiveness
- no administration achieves the policies it has been set
- administrators have evolved “strategies of evasion” to avoid the participation of stakeholders; such strategies in turn are based on an antiquated concept of social change as social engineering, conducted from the top-down, and combined with half-conscious racism.

In order to evolve and implement efficient inclusive policies, the government needs to conduct a major effort of reform of administrations. To date, such reform has been largely imitated, leading to a lack of enabling environment for any policy, and particularly – for inclusive policies targeted at minorities.

Available policy choices

Lacking in understanding, sensitivity, policy-related and administrative capacity, the government is torn between two different alternatives in its minority-related activities. The problem is that the government does not know that it is thus torn. With such an understanding would come the choice of one over the other alternative.

Alternative 1: government attempts to compensate the suffering of the Roma as a homogenous group

Mostly, this is what the government is doing at the moment. It sees the Roma as a separate group, rather than a collection of citizens, and evolves policies that are “Roma-targeted” and un-connected to the national social policies.

This is a trap, because it does not address the roots of the problem: that the majority of the Roma have been excluded from the general process of modernization and do not possess the skills to be included into the mainstream of society’s life – i.e. to move from group survival tactics to strategies of individual (and family) prosperity.

At the same time, piecemeal Roma-targeted policies lead to a sharp reaction from the majority, because such policies are interpreted as “favourising” the Roma while discriminating the rest.

Or the government can choose something else:

Alternative 2: government policy focuses on helping the Roma overcome the trap of group helplessness and on providing the Roma with the skills that ensure their inclusion

Market forces can not be expected to provide such skills and attitudes to the Roma, not least because the Roma are the most dependent group in Bulgaria. A 2007 poll reveals that half of

Bulgarians, over 36% of Turks and only 6% of the Roma agree with the statement: “People should take care of their own lives”. Conversely, 94% of the Roma agree with the statement “The government must guarantee a decent life for all” (compared to 63% Turks and half of Bulgarians).

Socially speaking, the Roma form the bulk of Bulgaria’s poor and victimised “under-class”. Such issues should be addressed, in the first instance, by ethnicity-neutral inclusive social policies, in a reasonable combination with targeted activities. But efficient social policies of inclusion come first.

Examples:

- If the Ministry of Education simply carried out its Constitutional duties to include all children into school education, then Roma lack of education would not be the problem it is now; and if the Ministry did this, then Roma-specific activities would be few and temporary.
- If Bulgaria had (as it has not) a government and municipal housing policy for the poor, independent of their ethnicity, then specific “Roma housing projects” would be largely unnecessary, or very specific in nature.
- If the tax authorities had (as they do not have) an efficient policy of tax collection, the Roma would also be paying taxes, in return for which to demand services.
- If the Ministry of Health carried out its Constitutional duty to include all citizens in health services, then Roma-specific health projects would be few and specific.
- If the Ministry of Social Policy had an effective and inclusive programme of inclusion into the process of work, then Roma-specific projects would be few and specific.
- If the municipalities implemented (as they do not) effective urban planning policies, then the Roma-related initiatives targeted at the “ghettos” would be few and specific in nature.

Specific examples:

- Since 1990, Bulgarians and Turks have significantly increased their education level in comparison with the age groups over 50. In the Roma, exclusion from the education process has led to a reverse situation, with the young Roma reverting to the low education levels of the over-50 group.
- More than half of all school drop-outs are Roma.
- During 2006-7, targeted interventions in health have revealed that in some Roma communities up to 45% of Roma have no identity documents, and the great majority have no health insurance.
- As the rest of society begins to prosper, Roma non-inclusion into the work (and skills-acquisition) process places them in the position of a vulnerable, excluded, closed, helpless and discriminated group. This widens the gap with society, leading to further suspicion and distrust.

Best practices and government policy

Government policies are weak and non-inclusive. Administrations are non-participatory and lack sufficient sensitivity. Taken together, these weaknesses ensure that *best practices*, which have become available, are not taken on as national policy. Such practices have arisen out of

NGO work locally and EU-funded projects nationally, relating to desegregation in education, school attendance, work participation, health inclusion and so forth.

When the government and its administrations evolve policy-making / implementation capacity, there is a wealth of best practices, on which they would be able to draw in order to formulate and implement minority-related policies and actions.

General policy conclusion

Bulgaria is not yet at the stage of productively debating minority-targeted policies. This will come later. The problem at the moment is that the government's general, society-wide social policies fail to be inclusive. Against the background of this major failure, all Roma-specific interventions can only be a palliative at best and un-productive at worst.

Best practices arrived at during targeted interventions are not made into meaningful national policy.

Bulgaria suffers from severe lack of capacity to handle the “second generation” reforms: administration, education and rule of law. The completion of these reforms would go far to address Roma problems of exclusion and prejudice. Administration reform would produce an efficient, friendly and participatory administration, capable of implementing the social policies that benefit the vulnerable, the Roma included. Education reform would lead to Roma inclusion, and to a diminution of the xenophobia currently produced in education and by educators. Rule of law would eradicate the kind of corruption which ensures that there is no housing policy and no effective implementation of urban planning.

Only when existing policies relating to inclusion into education, work, health and housing begin to be effectively implemented, would it be productive to debate what other, minority-specific policies should additionally be evolved. While social policies are being effectively implemented, administrative efficiency must be combined with policy capacity and multi-cultural sensitivity – and these are key elements in the still absent reform of administration.

Once the social policies regarding *inclusion* are effectively in place, further policies of *representation* (in the various levels of government) and *participation* (in the formation and implementation of policies) must follow, regarding the Roma. This would further obviate the need for “targeted”, piecemeal activities; and would substitute for them a sustainable policy environment.